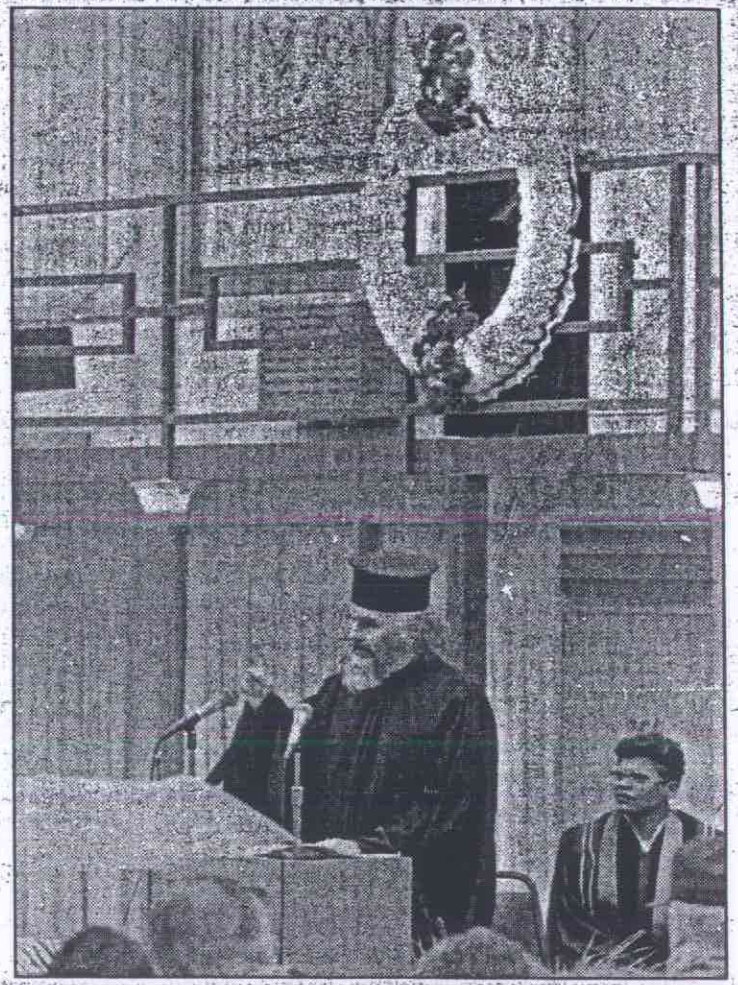
From left, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, King's daughter Yolanda, Coretta Scott King and another daughter, the Rev. Bernice King, sing "We Shall Overcome" yesterday at King's Atlanta grave.



AP Photos

The Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy speaks at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis yesterday in front of the balcony where King was shot.

A March Left Undone

King's legacy lauded, but goals called unfulfilled

By Ford Fessenden
STAFF WRITER

On the anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the civil rights movement paused yesterday to reflect on how far short of his vision the nation has fallen in the quarter-century since his death.

In ceremonies in his hometown, Atlanta; in the city where he died, Memphis, Tenn., and across the country, the legatees of King's martyred leadership praised the progress that has been made toward racial equality. But mostly they decried the distance still uncovered.

"We have not overcome," Memphis Mayor W. W. Herenton, who became the city's first black elected mayor in 1991, told about 4,000 people at the Mason Temple in Memphis, where King gave his last speech the night before he was killed. "We still have racism, bigotry, poverty, joblessness, homelessness and greed."

In Pasadena, Calif., a few miles from the site of the federal trial of four white Los Angeles police officers in the beating of a black motorist, the Rev. Jesse Jackson urged congregants at the All Saints Episcopal Church to "not just be spectators and witnesses to violence, but find a way to do something about it."

"We cannot put our destinies in the hands of 12 jurors and debating lawyers," Jackson said. The officers' acquittal on state charges in the beating of the motorist, Rodney King, touched off the bloody riots last year that claimed 53 lives.

Speaking later in Los Angeles, Jackson called on President Bill Clinton to hold a town hall meeting in South Central Los Angeles before the verdicts in the beating case are reached.

"The same plan to rebuild Moscow . . . must apply to rebuild America," he said, a reference to the weekend summit between Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

In Atlanta, Coretta Scott King, breaking with a tradition of remaining silent on the anniversary of her husband's death, called for a new mass movement to complete the unfinished journey.

"African-Americans . . . still suffer pervasive economic discrimination," King said in remarks at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where her husband was once pastor. While blacks have become enfranchised politically, the income gap between blacks and whites remains nearly as wide as it was in 1968, said King, who heads the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

King's remarks came after a ceremony in which a wreath was placed at her husband's grave in Atlanta. She called on followers to give the anniversary meaning by joining a march on Washington. Civil rights groups and their allies have planned the demonstration for Aug. 28, the 30th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington in which her husband attracted world attention with his "I Have a Dream" speech.

A poll published yesterday confirmed that many black Americans believe race relations have gotten worse since King's death. The New York Times-CBS Poll of 1,368 adults found that 52 percent of black respondents said race relations are the same or worse than they were in 1968. Forty-five percent thought things had improved. Among whites, 42 percent felt things were the

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same or worse, and 54 percent felt things were better.

The poll was taken March 28-31 and had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points for whites and 6 percentage points for blacks, since fewer blacks were interviewed.

In Memphis, outside the National Civil Rights Museum, about 300 people stood in a steady rain for a candlelight prayer vigil and a moment of silence in King's honor. The museum is on the site of the former Lorraine Motel, where a drifter, James Earl Ray, shot King to death. The 1964 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, in Memphis to support a strike by sanitation workers, was 39 at the time of his assassination. Ray is serving a 99-year prison sentence for the killing, though he sought to recant his guilty plea shortly after entering it.

In New York City, Mayor David N. Dinkins joined several hundred people in a march by the United Nations to honor and remember the civil rights leader. A memorial service at United Nations Chapel also drew former boxers Muhammad Ali and Floyd Patterson and writers Norman Mailer, Derek Walcott, Alice Walker, Gloria Steinem and Toni Morrison.

This story was supplemented by news-service reports.